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English Roundtable Web Chat on **“Coping with Plagiarism”**

Abstract:

Coping with Plagiarism

In this English Roundtable Web chat, we are going to discuss plagiarism and how to help students understand what it is and how to keep from plagiarizing.

Webster’s Online Dictionary defines “plagiarize” as:

Main Entry: pla•gia•rize

Pronunciation: \pl-j-rz also -j--\

Function: verb

Inflected Form(s): pla•gia•rized; pla•gia•riz•ing

Etymology: plagiary

Date: 1716

transitive verb : to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own : use (another's production) without crediting the source
intransitive verb : to commit literary theft : present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source

— pla•gia•riz•er noun

(from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plagiarize>)

Many students and teachers are not aware of what constitutes plagiarism. Many students feel that if a native speaker of English writes something that is published, then who are they to try and say it a different or better way in their not-so-perfect English. In this web chat we would like to discuss what constitutes plagiarism and how to help students keep from committing plagiarism.

Transcript

wang hongwei: hello long time no see!!

Mark: Nice to meet everyone here! I get a good chance to learn.

wang hongwei: in China, to help students to commit plagiarism has become an industry,

Mark: Yes!

Wang Ping: Hi Everyone! Happy Spring and Happy New Year to Thailand!

Damon Anderson: Mark, we aren't using mics in this chat, only text.

wendy ashby: Hi Mark. Great question to start off with! I think the difference between the two is that cultural transmission can be defined as common knowledge that cannot be attributed to somebody specific, whereas plagiarism happens when you take another person's intellectual property without giving them credit.

wang hongwei: it is like corporate management, you pay, we help you to pass the exam

Damon Anderson: Quoting an old saying or a Confucius saying which is now public knowledge and domain is not plagiarizing as long as you still give credit to the source, if known. Would you all agree with this?

wendy ashby: Wang Hongwei, can you explain more how you think students are helped with plagiarism or encouraged to do so by Chinese companies? I am not sure I understand what you mean.

Mark: Maybe the best way to copy with the plagiarism is to encourage our students to be more creative. But being creative is not so easy for them.

wendy ashby: Damon, I would agree.

wang hongwei: this kind of "companies" do thing for the sake of money

wendy ashby: Wang Hongwei, can you tell us more about what the companies do to add to this problem? This is a new idea for me.

Damon Anderson: Actually, the Internet is both helping students to plagiarize by selling things like term papers, and the Internet is helping teachers to find plagiarism.

Damon Anderson: If I start off my short story with: It was a dark and stormy night when Bao kept into the house?

Mark: With the help of pc it becomes easier for students to plagiarize.

Damon Anderson: I meant "crept" not "krept". My bad.

wang hongwei: yes. when exams like CET-4 CET-6, TEM-4 and TEM-8 and even the national college entrance exam come, you can see the ads (illegal), almost everywhere within the campus and the neighborhood

Damon Anderson: When it comes to exam cramming, I don't think we will ever win the battle against plagiarism unless the exams change. Let's focus more on in-class, homework, writing research papers.

Mark: We sometimes learn by imitation or copying. To a certain degree it is a necessary process for us to go through if we want to obtain some knowledge.

Wang Ping: Wang Hongwei, I don't quite agree with you that the test-prep companies are teaching students to plagiarize. More often they are teaching test-taking skills to appeal to students who hope to score high in high-stake tests.

wendy ashby: Damon, the computer would tag you for plagiarism because the number of words in a phrase that will set off a computer detector for plagiarism is like three to four words. I just reviewed some grading software for CALICO that linked itself to one of these internet sites. So, at what point do we as teachers follow up on that? How much can a student copy?

Damon Anderson: How much can the student copy without citing the author, or how much can the student use of another author's words, even if the author is cited?

wendy ashby: Mark, I agree. I always gave my writing students a sample of what their paper should be like. But then sometimes, they would copy what I gave them even though I told them many many times that this was only a format example and that they had to come up with their own ideas.

wang hongwei: it may depend on what service you subscribe, and how much you pay the "company", the students may use their mini-earphone and mobilephone to receive the answers and keys to the tests. that is what i know about the organized plagiarism, a new kind of "crime" in China?

Damon Anderson: Wendy, this is what students are trained to do in the writing classes here I have seen. The teachers want them to copy their samples and then add a few original ideas.

Mark: we can never have our own thoughts without "borrowing" some from others. Maybe as a teacher what we can do is to restrict the practice in class.

Damon Anderson: Mark, I disagree with you. We certainly can have our own thoughts without borrowing from someone else.

Wang Ping: Can we share some of the examples of plagiarism that we've found with our class and how have we brought this to our students' attention?

Mark: Damon, I agree with you. This is how I have learned my English.

wendy ashby: I always told my students you can use as much of the author's words as you want to, but you must must must attribute it correctly. I also told them that for paraphrased ideas, it was a good idea to also refer to a source. My take on this as a teacher is that it is better to over cite than under cite.

Damon Anderson: I agree, Wendy.

wang hongwei: also the on-line sources provide them with a lot of conviniences, they don't have to do the real writing, just download!!

Mark: I mean we are inspireed by others.

Damon Anderson: Yes, Mark, we are inspired by others' thinking and words, but we don't have to palgiarize them.

wendy ashby: Mark, what do you mean when you say restrict this activity. Do you mean writing your own things or copying things? Which activity do you think needs to be restricted to students?

Wang Ping: That sounds great, Wendy!

Mark: Paraphrasing is also a problem to be faced with.

wang hongwei: that is a good question, sometimes it is hard to tell the difference b/t borrowing and copying!!

wendy ashby: Mark, copying and paraphrasing are not problems per se. The problem is when writers don't make VERY clear to readers what is copied or paraphrased and what is your own writing.

Mark: I mean when we are acquiring language skills in class, we may learn by coping some sentences or phrases in order to improve our writing skills.

wendy ashby: Wang Hongwei - that line between "taking" and "borrowing" is a little fuzzy sometimes. This is why it takes a long time to teach students how to do it properly - even native speakers of English have a hard time with it.

wendy ashby: Mark, I think it is OK to copy structures. Nobody owns the English language. It is when a person copies ideas and presents them as his own ideas that the problems begin.

Damon Anderson: At a novice level, many students will copy simple phrases and sentences. But this is a learning process. When they have more skill and knowledge, then they should begin to express themselves more individually. I agree with Wendy.

Mark: Yes. I agree in academic writing we must make it clear to readers what is copied or paraphrased.

wang hongwei: students always have this kind of problem when they are asked to write the graduation paper!!

Mark: In serious publication or academic training, students should be discouraged to copy.

wendy ashby: I think one of the cultural misunderstandings here has to do with how we view group vs. individual knowledge. In America, individual thinking is prized and rewarded. Ideas can be used to make money. So Americans get very upset when somebody "takes" their opportunity to be original or to make money. I think in China, group knowledge is valued more and imitation shows respect, not disrespect like it does in the US.

Wang Ping: Chinese culture values memorization of classics in early education. We believe a lot of exposure to classics early on can help build a good sense and feeling about the language, thus facilitate language acquisition and output. But often times educators fail to remind learners that it's unfair to take others' intellectual property without asking!

Mark: I agree with Wendy.

Damon Anderson: As teachers, we can give our students practice in trying to put thoughts into their own words. Give them a sentence or a paragraph and have them state what it means to them.

Wang Ping: Wendy, that's a good note.

wendy ashby: Mark, why only in serious publications? What is a serious kind of writing? Should they think it is OK to copy in work writing or in personal writing?

wang hongwei: i agree with Wang Ping

wendy ashby: Wang Ping - you too! We hit on the same thing at the same time from each of our cultures. I think it is an important part of training. Not just how to cite, but why. What it means to different audiences to copy or not to copy.

Damon Anderson: We used to do the same in American education, Ping. I had to memorize a lot of Shakespeare, and poets, etc.

Mark: I believe on informal occasions we often use others' idea to support our own.

Damon Anderson: Mark, there is nothing wrong with using another's idea; it is just that we should cite that person.

Mark: Sure, but the whole passage is full of citations, where is your idea?

Damon Anderson: Then we go back to the question of how much is too much.

Wang Ping: I think as teachers, we should be brave and open enough to encourage our students to have their own thinking, invite them to challenge teachers and authority, and welcome dissent. That way students may gradually learn to free up their thinking, and to express their own ideas, however trivial or minor they may seem to be.

wendy ashby: Damon, I think though that sometimes when we talk about ideas, we don't tend to refer to sources much. It is more expected in writing. Maybe part of the understanding of the issue has to do with whether there is a record of our idea or whether it is a passing conversation. I would agree with Mark that informal (like discussions) is not as big of a deal. But if there is a record of a person stating an idea, it had better be clear who it belongs to. Would you agree Mark? Is that what you mean?

Mark: I do believe plagiarism should be stopped.

Mark: Thank you! Wendy. You are right.

wang hongwei: trying to put thoughts into their own words, in some cases is very hard for most non-native E-learners, the result may be very discouraging, they may sound Chinglish, or may cause misunderstanding, sometimes receive very low marks in exams, so some students would rather give up, and sort out copying

Damon Anderson: I would agree that in the informal conversation, it is more common and more accepted. But Mark had said that almost the whole document is someone else's words (one or more people).

Mark: Almost every idea we get has been expressed sometime somewhere.

Wang Ping: Mark, I think to allow plagiarism will jeopardize the cultivation of free thinking and creativity.

wendy ashby: So can I clarify something with the Chinese speakers? Are you saying that because your training in writing is to compile other ideas and that you have been discouraged from adding your own ideas to academic discussions - this means that it is really difficult to write anything that would not need to be cited? And this contributes to the difficulty with not wanting to have a paper that is full of nothing but citations? I'm kind of hearing that - and it is a very interesting new perspective for me.

Damon Anderson: Some notable author once said that there are no new thoughts.

wang hongwei: put thoughts into their own words, is by the way, a time-consuming process.

Mark: Wang, allowing plagiarism will contain the development of culture.

wendy ashby: Wang Hongwei - this goes back to the idea of your audience. If a paper is graded based on grammar and presentation, then there is an incentive to copy. But we punish plagiarism severely in US classrooms. I have failed students for copying.

Damon Anderson: Khun Nina, is plagiarism a big problem in Thailand?

wendy ashby: Mark - are you saying that civilization will die out if people don't keep copying it?

Wang Ping: Wendy, strong punishment may help students learn. I was surprised to see that in the U.S. the fine is \$1000 for littering on highway. I hope we'd do the same here in China.

wang hongwei: then tell me what criteria you use to judge good writing!!

Mark: Oh NO.

Mark: Just the opposite!

Damon Anderson: Wendy, I think Mark is saying that without new ideas and thoughts, a culture will not grow, but will be contained and remain stagnant.

Mark: In China, we will also fail students if they copy.

Phanisara: Thai students are too concerned with getting everything correct so they end up copying everything.

Mark: Damon, that is what I mean.

wendy ashby: Wang Hongwei. I used a six level rubric. Did the student complete the assignment and address the topic and audience correctly? Is the paper organized logically? Are the paragraphs well constructed and contain only one idea or topic? Are the sentences intelligible? and Finally, how about the grammar and mechanics. Plagiarism is such a big deal because it is not grammar and mechanics. It goes back to whether you addressed the topic correctly. And failing in that category is a sign of really poor and problematic writing from a grader's perspective.

wendy ashby: Wang Hogmei - sorry that was only five. The second category is whether the ideas are original and presented clearly

Damon Anderson: It seems that perfection, the pressure of getting everything correct, is what can be a cause of so much plagiarism.

wendy ashby: Damon - that and the discouragement from committing opinions to paper in a graded setting. It is really a lot of pressure on Chinese writers.

wang hongwei: agree with Damon

Wang Ping: Thank you for being sympathetic, Damon and Wendy. That is the case.

Mark: Yes, for Chinese students finishing the papers is a great pressure for them.

wendy ashby: I really have a new perspective from this discussion. I had no idea how many deeply rooted cultural ideas were in direct opposition to the idea of citing a source. I understand now why it is such a difficult concept to grasp and if I ever teach writing to non native speakers again, I will approach this differently both in teaching and "punishing" students

Damon Anderson: Wendy, what will you do differently?

Violet Zhang: Maybe, another cause for plagiarism is that Chinese students are slothful at thinking. Current standardized multi-questions form let them get used to finding answers instead of thinking actively.

Phanisara: Writing seems to be a big problem for us. We don't have proper background even writing in our own native language.

Mark: The education system or the grading system has to be improved. To be frank, papers are not often required in my university, but before they graduate, they have to write a serious paper containing new ideas will be a great challenge for most of the students. We need to teach them and train them in the educating process instead of just focus on the result.

Wang Ping: Students also are pushed to learn not to digress from the textbook when answering the comprehension questions. If their answer is a little different from what's in the text, or add some personal opinion, the teacher would be concerned, saying, no, that's not exactly what the textbook says. So early on, students are discouraged from adding their own thoughts and reflections in discussing reading passages.

wendy ashby: First, I would tell them about this discussion. I would present both sides of the issue as I understand it. I would frame it as a cultural clash instead of a personal failure on the part of the student to follow writing conventions. And I would be a bit more sympathetic to how much time it might take for a Chinese ESL writer to get this figured out.

Damon Anderson: I don't think that the students are slothful at thinking. I just conducted interviews this past weekend for a scholarship program. What we judges noted was that when the students talked about their field of interest in school, they spoke well and correctly. But when we asked them to talk about something more personal or outside of what they normally

discuss, they had wonderful thoughts, but made many more errors that did not interfere with communication, however.

Wang Ping: Violet Zhang, that's a good point!

Violet Zhang: I see eye to eye with you, Wang Ping. IN most English classes, students are not encouraged to think independently.

wendy ashby: Violet - we think American students are slothful at thinking too :-) It is a common complaint of the old fashioned teachers :-)

Damon Anderson: Thinking about what Ping wrote, perhaps the problem rests with the teachers who are not a proficient as they should be in English and so discourage original answers because those answers would be too difficult to assess.

wendy ashby: Any original thoughts out there? :-) Or should I quote something - :-)

Damon Anderson: If you have the perfect quote for today - share it!! :-)

Violet Zhang: Actually, students need to be guided towards good thinking.

Damon Anderson: That is true of young learners, Violet Zhang. But what about college level students.

Mark: I do believe the young college students have their original ideas and they just need guiding and training.

wendy ashby: Damon - yep. We talked about that when we discussed quantification and rubrics. Grading papers in the US can get difficult here too because students demand to know why one idea is a good grade and another is a bad grade. Sometimes I wished i could give them a multiple choice test.

Wang Ping: I confess I plagiarized too in college courses. They are just so boring and totally irrelevant to us. Sorry for defending my plagiarism. But I think curriculum developers and school administrators run the risk of pushing students to plagiarize if they don't do a good job.

wendy ashby: Wang Ping - you make me smile :) We all have stories like that I think...

Mark: Making a judgement of plagiarism is hard for both teachers and administrators.

Damon Anderson: True confessions - Confession is good for the soul (did I just plagiarize? :-))

Mark: The more we learn, the less we plagiarize.

wendy ashby: Mark, the judgment is not hard. It is pretty clear cut when somebody has plagiarized. What is difficult is how to handle it in a fair and constructive manner in accordance with institutional policies.

wendy ashby: damon - that is common knowledge :-)

wendy ashby: Mark - that is so true. I like that. May I quote you??

Mark: Thank you! That is what I am doing.

Damon Anderson: See Mark, now you will become internationally famous, but if she took those words as her own, you would not be known as well.

Phanisara: I like that too Mark.

wendy ashby: Mark - quoting yourself? Kiddinng...great line though. I'll be using it in the future

Wang Ping: Haha, I like your sense of humor.

wang hongwei: Confession is good for the soul !! yes! i agree!!

wendy ashby: Mark. or if you got paid for that idea and then I started saying it and people started to give me some of the money, wouldn't you be angry at me?

Mark: We learn to be independent thinker gradually. :-)

Phanisara: I think the more students have a chance at sharing their own original thoughts, they will less likely plagiarized. And they can develop logical thinking. Good topic to continue.

Damon Anderson: We are out of time, folks. This has been a very interesting discussion. What shall we discuss next month?

Mark: You have helped me to promote the idea, and you should be paid.:-)

wendy ashby: Nice - I like collective ideas :-)

Damon Anderson: Any thoughts on a topic for our next chat?

Mark: I've learned so much today! Thank You!

Wang Ping: Thank you all for joining us. It's been a lot fun!

wendy ashby: Thanks everyone. I love our chats.

Phanisara: Creative Thinking Pedagogy. Thank you everyone.

Wang Ping: We'll send out an announcement for our next chat about a week ahead of time. Thank you for joining us on last minute notice.

Damon Anderson: Creative thinking would be a great follow up to this discussion. Thanks for the idea Khun Nina.

Damon Anderson: Thank you everyone. If you would like a copy of today's transcript, let Ping know.

Damon Anderson: The chat is now closed. We will leave this up for you to read, however.